

Researcher Profile: Touhami Abdelkhalek, MIMAP-Morocco Coordinator



Dr Touhami Abdelkhalek (IDRC Photo: M. Hibler)

2002-12-23

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Time appears to have stood still along the road from Beni Mellal to Marrakesh in central Morocco. In the meagre shade of rocky outcroppings, jellaba-clad boys and old men desultorily watch over skinny goats scrounging the arid countryside for scarce fodder. Veiled women peek from the doors of ochre, low mud-walled compounds. Dozens of container-laden donkeys carry children to and from the communal well.

This is in sharp contrast to the frenzied traffic that speeds past on the paved highway and the gleaming service stations that serve both vehicles and passengers.

"There are two Moroccos," says Dr Touhami Abdelkhalek, professor and researcher at Morocco's Institut national de statistique et d'économie appliquée (INSÉA) — traditional and modern. Morocco is also rich and poor.

It is this second country that holds his attention. Dr Abdelkhalek coordinates a network of researchers working to understand poverty and develop appropriate poverty reduction strategies. The team is part of the Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies (MIMAP) network, supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), that links researchers, policy officials, nongovernmental organizations, and international experts in a dozen countries of Asia and Africa.

But Dr Abdelkhalek also knows poverty much more intimately. "When talking about development, I don't need to consult many textbooks," he says. "I have them all in my head." Born in an oasis in the province of Errachidia in southern Morocco, he was the youngest of 12 children. "All the indicators of underdevelopment, you can find them in my life," he says "a large family, illiterate parents, high infantile death rates, and rural-urban migration, as my parents moved to the city of Midelt when I was 9 months old."

Dr Abdelkhalek's father was a sharecropper for a French property owner. "Sharecropping is a concept that we now teach when covering economic theory," he says. "At the time my father earned four dirhams a day — \$0.50 to feed all those mouths. I know hunger," he adds. "And my parents couldn't afford schooling for us all," he says, "so my sisters didn't go to school except for the youngest. My eldest brother left home very young to join the army to help support the family."

It was one of his older brothers who saw the importance of sending children to school. "My life changed the day my mother took me to register for school," he says. "That was the turning point." He remembers that, even then, on Sundays he sold shopping bags at a local store to pay for his first notebook — one cent a week for a year.

An economics window on the world

Dr Abdelkhalek discovered economics in secondary school, at one of Morocco's largest schools in the city of Meknès. "If I had to start over, I'd still choose economics," he says, "I find it a very open discipline." It can't be otherwise, he explains: "in economics you need to be interested in health, in energy, in agriculture. You need to be interested in the poor and in wealth — in almost everything."

There followed undergraduate and graduate studies at the INSEA, then doctoral studies in Canada. Why Canada? In the Francophone world, if you want to pursue advanced studies in French, outside of Africa," he says, "the world becomes very small: either France, Belgium, or Canada — mainly in Québec universities. He chose the Department of Economics of the Université de Montréal because of its strength in econometrics, a discipline more closely akin to statistics, then his area of specialization. "I'm really happy to have been in that department," he says. "There I discovered how people work, how people appreciate those who work, how people respect one another. That has marked me for life."

Dr Abdelkhalek pursued double areas of specialization in his thesis: econometrics and international development, thanks to the Programme de recherche économique appliquée en développement international (Programme PARADI), administered by the Université de Montréal's Centre de recherche et de développement en économique (CRDE) and Université Laval's Centre de recherche en économie et en finance appliquées (CRÉFA). (Financed by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the Programme PARADI ended in 1999.) This is a fairly unique niche, he notes, since "econometricists don't generally know development problems, and development experts aren't econometricists." And so he straddled the two. "I seem to be made for work on poverty, on the politics of poverty, on modelling poverty, on all that surrounds it in the field of international development," he says. "That niche still interests me."

In 1995, after more than three years of study, research, and teaching in Canada, Dr Abdelkhalek returned to INSEA in Rabat. "I think I'm more useful here than in Canada," he says. "Technology transfer, aid, can also take this form, in having people who are trained return to train, in turn."

Monitoring poverty in Morocco

But he has maintained close links with his former colleagues, as associate researcher of the CRDE and of CRÉFA and through his participation in the MIMAP network. The Morocco project was launched in 1998 to understand and analyze poverty and inequality in the country, and study how macroeconomic policies affected poor populations. To date the project has contributed substantially to the poverty debate in Morocco. For instance, the MIMAP team has called on the authorities to replace the traditional monetary definition of poverty by a new, multidimensional definition that takes into account such factors as access to education and health services, as well as

other criteria important to poor populations. "The topic we are working on has not been explored in Morocco, and so the expectations are high," he says.

Dr Abdelkhalek and his colleagues are also working to improve statistical disaggregation techniques so that they can separate the effects attributable to an antipoverty policy from those occasioned by structural changes in the country. "For example, if we fail to take account of the effects of technological change," he says, "we may end up overestimating the effect of policies."

The MIMAP-Morocco project is now entering a second phase in which special attention will be paid to bringing the research results to the attention of Morocco's policymakers. "I know we have a long way to go," says Dr Abdelkhalek, "but we think we're on the right track."

CIDA makes an important financial contribution to the MIMAP program. The program also enjoys support from the Swiss Development Cooperation directorate, the UK Department for International Development, the United Nations Fund for Women, and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

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